

66-2110

Mr. Walt Rostow

Here is the study you requested.

Copies have been forwarded to
General Taylor, Messrs. Rusk, McNamara,
and Komer.

Richard Helms

Attachment: 1

SOUTH VIETNAM: AN APPRAISAL OF CURRENT
POLITICAL DYNAMICS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF POLITICS.

10 May 1966

General Maxwell Taylor
The Honorable Dean Rusk
The Honorable Robert McNamara
Mr. Robert Komer

This study responds to an inquiry from
Mr. Rostow. He has asked that a copy be
given you in preparation for the NSC meeting
at 5:30 P.M., today.

Richard Helms

Attachment - 1

SOUTH VIETNAM: AN APPRAISAL OF CURRENT
POLITICAL DYNAMICS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF POLITICS.

10 May 1966

SECRET

**SOUTH VIETNAM: AN APPRAISAL OF CURRENT POLITICAL
DYNAMICS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE
MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF POLITICS**

Summary

Under goading political pressures by the Buddhist leadership, dominated by Tri Quang, the military government in South Vietnam has been forced unwillingly into commitments and actions which, at this reading, seem destined to produce a new constitution and civilian government, certainly within a year's time. These political pressures, spawned in an environment of heightened armed conflict and effective Viet Cong political agitation, have created new tensions and fragilities in the Vietnamese military establishment. The clear Communist content of the propaganda lines used by the Struggle Groups in the I Corps area symptomize the continuing gravity of the turmoil there, in spite of a seeming easing of tensions there in recent weeks. General Dinh's command and leadership have brought about this superficial easing, but have not yet dominated the more fundamentally divisive forces at work in the area. His own objectives and motivations remain unclear as well.

Odds would seem to favor the military establishment's observing their present political commitments and going along with the constituent assembly and the subsequent formation of a civil government. Real

SECRET

SECRET

risk remains, however, that military elements, not yet coalesced, may unite in action against suspect Buddhist motives. This risk is increased if a civil government begins to move toward a neutralist position of disengagement.

The other religious sects and groupings appear at this time to have no decisive political impact. The contest is essentially one between the military establishment and the Tri Quang hierarchy. It appears that the U.S. does not have any significant leverage at its disposal in this contest. The imperative factors now at work in the social structure of Vietnam are deeply indigenous in their character and roots. If a Buddhist-dominated civil government emerges, and does not provoke military reaction by moving to the left we may indeed witness the forging of a new and intrinsically more natural Vietnamese national character, a development which could strengthen the national fabric in our joint endeavor. If a new government does move to the left, additional and greater political convulsions can be expected.

I. The Problem

South Vietnam is in the midst of a period of political ferment and institutional transition. The outcome of this ferment and the institutional forms that will emerge from the transitional process cannot be predicted with any degree of assurance. Both will depend in large

SECRET

~~SECRET~~

measure on the actions and interactions of the various groups in South Vietnam -- regional, military, religious and others -- which presently possess some measure of political strength or influence. This paper will endeavor to assess the strength, cohesiveness and political intentions or aspirations of each of the major groups in order to provide the best possible basis for an overall political appraisal.

II. The Political Complexion of I Corps

The political complexion of I Corps (and the First Division) involves an amalgam of religious, regional and personal loyalties. The Buddhists (or, more precisely, Tri Quang's supporters) have the predominant political voice. They exercise their influence by manipulating student groups, have the support of some local government officials (including police officials), and are attempting to control or subvert the military through Buddhist chaplains and military commanders amenable to Buddhist guidance.

General Chuan's appointment as acting I Corps commander to replace General Thi and General Nhuan's appointment as First Division commander (vice Chuan) greatly increased Buddhist influence, since both Chuan and Nhuan were chosen primarily because of their acceptability to the Buddhists.

25X1

Pro-Struggle elements predominate

SECRET

in the First Division, but this is strongly resented by some loyalist officers and, probably, troops. The First Division, in short, is badly rent over political issues.

When General Dinh succeeded Chuan as I Corps commander, he chose to act with extreme caution in reasserting central government control over I Corps. Virtually all Struggle leaders such as Danang Mayor Man and the Struggle Movement's principal military leader, Colonel Yeu (who commands the special military sector surrounding Danang) have been permitted to retain their positions. General Dinh is moving with considerable political skill, but his own personal objectives and loyalties are far from clear.

Demonstrations and violence in I Corps have diminished since Dinh's arrival about four weeks ago. The government has resumed control of radio stations, and some military units associated with the Struggle have complied with orders to move out of the Danang area. Tensions remain high, however, not only between Struggle Forces and the government but between Struggle Forces and local anti-Struggle groups, particularly various factions of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD). Military and paramilitary forces are involved on both sides and there is a constant threat of violence.

Tri Quang has returned to Hue and though he appears to be trying to clamp down the more violent tactics he encouraged in the immediate aftermath of General Thi's ouster, there is no evidence to suggest he

~~SECRET~~

has abandoned his objective of broadening and strengthening the "Struggle force" organization as a political instrument which he can use over the ensuing months to further his political aspirations.

The scope and intensity of disturbances in I Corps apparently caught the Viet Cong unprepared, though the VC have moved swiftly to take advantage of the situation as best they can. We have evidence of VC instructions to student groups to participate in demonstrations and prepare banners and slogans. Struggle Force broadcasts, especially by the Hue Radio, frequently use themes and terminology of obvious VC inspiration. It seems clear that the VC have also infiltrated the Struggle Force leadership to at least some significant extent.

Though on the surface the situation in I Corps has improved, in fact little if any substantial progress has been made in returning it to GVN (i. e., Saigon) control. Furthermore, the extent to which persons of leftist or neutralist persuasion, including almost certainly some actual VC agents, have succeeded in acquiring positions of influence within the I Corps Struggle Movement raises some serious questions. It is possible that -- whatever be his personal intentions -- Tri Quang may find he can no longer dictate the themes or actions of the Struggle Movement. Should this prove to be the case, Tri Quang may consider himself forced to go to the head of the anti-war parade to conceal the fact that he can no longer control the movement he started. This has not necessarily happened yet. But it is a real danger.

~~SECRET~~
-5-

SECRET

III. The Military Leadership

The unity and cohesion of the GVN military establishment have suffered as a result of the unrest following the dismissal of General Thi as I Corps commander. The latent strains created by Ky's original tactic of including in the government all military leaders who could pose a serious threat to the regime have become more evident under current political pressures.

Chief of State and Directorate Chairman General Thieu and Deputy Prime Minister General Co have tended to become isolated from their Directorate colleagues. The four Corps commanders have been devoting themselves to their regional duties while doing little to bolster the authority of the central government or assist it in solving its difficulties. Prime Minister Ky retains the loyalty and support of most of the principal military figures, but this loyalty derives largely from friendship, personal association, and expediency rather than from any high regard for Ky as a statesman or military leader. This support could rapidly dissipate, particularly since senior Vietnamese military figures have rarely let personal considerations interfere with political expediency.

Failure of the central government to take decisive positive action against military insubordination in I Corps and Buddhist agitation throughout the country has resulted in some dissatisfaction among senior

SECRET

SECRET

field grade officers in the Marines, Rangers, airborne, and armored forces as well as other elements of the ground and air forces. Although no clear organization or leadership of these so-called "baby turks" has become evident, it appears likely that General Le Nguyen Khang, commander of the capital military region, and Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Director-General of National Police and chief of the Military Security Service, are in sympathy with them and could probably assume leadership of the group should they deem it advisable or desirable to do so.

In general, the military establishment has shown no great enthusiasm for elections or an early transition to civilian government. The goal of drafting a constitution and holding elections was first publicly announced in November 1965, but measures to implement it have been repeatedly changed and postponed. The current program for transition to civilian rule was promulgated on 14 April under pressure of widespread demonstrations and the breakdown of government authority in the I Corps area. The government has done little to resolve or clarify ambiguous aspects of the present program. The electoral-law drafting committee that met on 5 May, for example, complained that the government had not followed the recommendation of a preliminary committee that met on 23 April and the chairman of this drafting group is currently trying to clarify its mandate. General Ky's various public utterances have done little to clarify matters. Instead, at various times he has made informal or off-the-cuff comments (e.g., at Can Tho on 7 May) which

SECRET

have been interpreted and publicized in ways working against the government's position.

The reluctance of the leadership to propose and carry out a clear-cut, definite transitional program is probably based on an ingrained distrust of civilian politicians and a conviction that the time is not yet ripe for elections and a civilian government. The military leadership is probably resigned to some sort of elected civilian government, but will attempt to provide safeguards to ensure that Communist influence is excluded, that the war effort is not weakened, and that the military retain substantial influence. Formation of a military political party such as that of Korean President Park Chung Hee has been considered by Prime Minister Ky and his advisors in the past, and Ky probably continues to favor this idea. (He has suggested that military officers resign their commissions and run for election to the National Assembly with military support.) In any event, there will be a continuing possibility throughout the coming months that a military officer or group of officers will attempt to seize control of the government and prevent the creation of a civilian regime.

There is probably no organized military group now actively planning a coup. There are probably a number of individuals and small groups, however, who would like to take control of the government under certain circumstances, and would attempt to do so if they thought conditions were favorable (e.g., the "baby turks" mentioned above).

SECRET

SECRET

Continuing tensions in I Corps provide continuing opportunities for potential coup-makers. Former I Corps commander General Thi has not been conspicuous in recent events in the area, but there is a considerable reservoir of loyalty to him and deterioration in the political situation in Saigon might encourage Thi to believe he could utilize his remaining support in I Corps to reassert himself on the national scene. There is still some sympathy for Thi among top leaders in Saigon, and Thi may feel he can count on some support from within the present leadership. It seems unlikely that the present I Corps commander, General Dinh, would be in a position to challenge the central government in the near future. Dinh has been described as universally disliked by everyone who has been associated with him and he probably lacks any significant following that could support a power play although there are reports that he has some private arrangement with Tri Quang. There have been widespread and persistent rumors in Saigon that Chief of State General Thieu and Deputy Prime Minister Co have been plotting to remove Ky. General Quang, IV Corps commander, has been rumored to be in league with Co, and the commanders of II and III Corps are also linked with Thieu and Co in rumored coup plots. If there is any fire behind the smoke, it may be that Thieu and Co have been feeling out the possibilities of a palace coup, in which Ky and some other leaders would be removed while the general framework of the government would remain.

SECRET

~~SECRET~~

In short, the military establishment is restless and incipient factions are beginning to emerge. Though there may be little concrete coup plotting presently in train there is obviously considerable talking and maneuvering. At the moment the odds are probably a shade better than even that no significant military group will move to disrupt the process of transition to elected civilian government if there is no fresh outbreak of serious disorder and unrest and if the new government does not appear in military eyes to be neutralist or Communist influenced. Should either of these conditions materialize, however, the odds on military intervention would almost certainly tip the other way.

IV. The Buddhists

The Buddhists are the most important single factor in the current political turmoil in South Vietnam. They precipitated the crisis and they will maintain pressure on the government until they achieve a considerable portion of their aims or until they are forcefully repressed. The Buddhists cannot be said to have any precise tactical plans for achieving their goals. Their intermediate aim, however, appears to be a government which will be susceptible to substantial Buddhist influence without being overtly dominated by the Buddhist clerical hierarchy. In working toward this goal, they have shown considerable political skill in exploiting opportunities as they arose. The outstanding example is their prompt utilization of General Thi's dismissal as a springboard for their current campaign. Within two days, they had enunciated the "four points" that

SECRET

became the guidelines for the Struggle Movement in I Corps and elsewhere. They have also exhibited an ability to control military personnel through the Buddhist chaplains and to plan and carry out demonstrations efficiently.

One of the Buddhists' major assets is their existing organization which includes a national headquarters and subsidiary organs which are particularly effective in the I Corps area and the coastal provinces. Although weakened to some extent by internal disputes, this structure provides the Buddhists with a means for initiating political action simultaneously in many places. Aside from the armed forces, no other non-Communist political force in the country can command such an effective political machine. Though the Buddhist hierarchy's involvement in politics has cost them some support, especially among middle- and upper-class Buddhists who feel the clergy should devote themselves solely to religious matters, rank-and-file Buddhists probably remain large responsive to guidance by the bonzes.

Recent events have probably tended to increase Buddhist solidarity, at least for the time being. The more moderate elements generally associated with Thich Tam Chau and the Saigon Buddhists have tended to lose influence while the activists associated with Thich Tri Quang and the Buddhists of the central provinces have gained. While long-standing divisions based on regional and personal loyalties persist, Tri Quang and his followers have somewhat extended their control of

SECRET

SECRET

The domination of the Tri Quang faction is likely to persist through any period of tension or anti-government struggle, but after "victory" -- i.e., the establishment of a civilian government in which the Buddhists have a strong or predominant voice -- the fissures and internal stresses within the Buddhist movement will certainly show themselves.

V. The Catholics

In contrast to the Buddhists, the Catholics now appear to present a less united front than they did before the current crisis began. One reason is that certain Catholic leaders who indicated some willingness to cooperate with the Buddhist campaign for elections and a civilian government have met with opposition from other members of the Catholic hierarchy. A division in Catholic ranks has thus appeared and the Catholic bloc is currently undergoing a reorganization to restrict the influence of those Catholics who might advocate cooperation with the Buddhists.

The majority of Catholics remain opposed to the Buddhist campaign. Many would prefer to see elections and a civilian government postponed rather than run the risk of Buddhist domination. A real threat of imminent Buddhist domination of the government would almost certainly result in Catholic counter-action and probably violence. For this reason, it is possible that a potential military coup-maker could successfully appeal to the Catholics for support on the ground that he

SECRET

SECRET

VI. Other Political Forces

The military, the Buddhists, and the Catholics are the only political elements capable of independent political activity throughout South Vietnam, though the capabilities of even these groups are severely limited by factional divisions. Other political parties and groups are so identified with certain regions, and so highly factionalized as to be incapable of coordinated national action. In the I Corps area, the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD) and the Dai Viet party are more active than elsewhere in the country. They have been consistently opposed to the Struggle Movement, although individual members have occasionally been Struggle sympathizers. There is now a move afoot to form a coalition of VNQDD, Dai Viet, and Catholic elements in the Hue area to oppose the influence of Struggle Forces and assure that Buddhists led by Tri Quang do not dominate the forthcoming constituent assembly.

In the southern part of South Vietnam, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects are more or less independent political elements in certain areas. In the past they have been willing to cooperate with the Catholics in opposition to the Buddhists. In the face of a threat of Buddhist domination, a coalition of Catholics, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao could constitute an effective opposition in parts of the Mekong Delta area.

The other significant political element consists of prominent natives of the southern part of South Vietnam (i.e., what the French called Cochin China). The major organization of this group is the "Southern Old Students' Association" of graduates of the four principal

SECRET

SECRET

French schools of the area. The membership of this Association includes former government officials, professors, lawyers, businessmen, and retired military officers. Because these southerners oppose the Ky government on the grounds that it is dominated by people born in the north, they are looked upon as a source of support for possible moves to replace the present regime. The principal leader of the southerners, retired General Tran Van Don, is frequently mentioned as a possible interim Prime Minister, or as Prime Minister of an eventual elected government. Don is a nominal Buddhist but is acceptable to many Catholics and probably retains some personal popularity among the military. He probably does not command enough real support to play an independent political role, but it is possible that he could emerge as a compromise candidate for a high office at some point in the transition to a civilian government.

VII. The Outlook

For the next few months South Vietnamese political life -- at least urban political life -- will be in a process of active ferment as South Vietnam transits a rough and rocky patch along the road to nationhood. The processes of political transition, balance-striking and institution building will obviously be complicated by the pressures and tensions of war and by the fact and sheer size of the U.S. presence in Vietnam. Pitfalls and possible sources of disaster abound and the immediate dangers of chaos or anarchy will be very real. Nevertheless, the type of political

SECRET

SECRET

evolution now in train is probably inevitable and something no interested group or party could stop, even if it wanted to. Furthermore, despite the obvious hazards and uncertainties, the process of political evolution -- even forced draft evolution -- is not unhealthy and could still produce a political structure with a broader popular base and stronger mandate than any South Vietnamese government has heretofore enjoyed.

SECRET